Assigning Responsibility: Basic Principles

The formal way of assigning responsibility for managing a road—which also establishes ownership of the road—is by designating the road. The notice that does so cites the act under which the road is to be designated, the location of the road, the responsible road agency, and the functions to be assigned to that agency. In this way responsibility for certain roads may be assigned to a central government agency, a local government agency, a community group, or a private entity (as with private sector toll roads). Responsibilities are normally assigned on the basis of a road’s functional classification. As the functional class changes, it should be reassigned from one road agency to another—usually from a lower- to a higher-level road agency, although downward reclassification also takes place.

One of the perennial problems in developing and transition economies is that the road classification system is often out of date. New roads may not have been designated, and changes in the functional class of existing roads may not have been accompanied by reassignment to the appropriate road agency. Updating the road classification system requires an accurate road inventory and identification of the road agency legally responsible for managing each road. If any roads have not been designated, they will have to be assigned to a legally constituted road agency or, in the case of community roads, to an appropriate community group (like a village council). The inventory may also identify the need to reclassify selected roads, based on changes in their functional class, and to reassign management of some roads from one road agency to another.

The road inventory will normally be used to divide the network into three or four functional hierarchies. The roads can then be grouped into consistent classes for setting common management objectives, construction and maintenance standards, and intervention levels. Countries with relatively low volumes of traffic often group their roads into three functional hierarchies: arterial roads, collector roads, and access roads (TRRL Overseas Unit 1988), while countries with high volumes of traffic usually group roads into four main functional hierarchies with several subdivisions: expressways, strategic routes, distributor roads (including main and secondary distributors), and local roads (including local roads and local access roads) (Local Authority Associations 1989).

The process of assigning managerial responsibility attempts to reconcile three conflicting objectives. First, to the extent possible, it attempts to keep the various functional hierarchies together. Second, it attempts to assign managerial responsibility in a way that is consistent with the country’s administrative structure. Since most countries are attempting to decentralize administrative responsibility to reduce the fiscal burden on the central government and strengthen local accountability, this means assigning managerial responsibility for collector roads and local access roads to provincial and district-level governments. Third, it attempts to assign responsibility to agencies that have the financial and technical capacity to manage the roads effectively.
Managing the Road Network

For the purpose of assigning managerial responsibility, the road network is divided into several administrative classes. Responsibility for managing the roads within each class is then assigned to a public or private sector agency, which becomes the custodian or temporary “owner” of these roads. The way in which these responsibilities are assigned generally depends on the size of the country, the extent of motorization, and the administrative structure of the central and local government.

The simplest management structures tend to be associated with centralized government systems in countries that are relatively small. They have a single-tier structure in which one or more central government road agencies take responsibility for managing most or all of the road network (as in Bangladesh, Jamaica, and Ghana). On the other hand, when the political and administrative system clearly distinguishes between the central and local government, countries tend to adopt a two-tier management structure (as in Latvia and the United Kingdom). Under this system local governments also become involved in management. This model suits countries with extensive road networks that cannot easily be managed by centralized road agencies.

Finally, countries with a federal administrative system tend to adopt a three-tier management structure in which central, provincial (state), and local governments all play a role in managing the road network. The three-tier structure is, however, not universal in federal countries. In some, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, the federal government delegates the management of most roads to provincial or state governments, and the management structure ends up looking like that in two-tier countries.

The road network is thus typically divided into four administrative classes for purposes of managing the different parts of the network:

- National roads, that is, major trunk roads, including expressways and toll roads.
- Regional and rural roads.
- Urban roads, which may also include some toll roads.
- Community roads, tracks, and trails.